


The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Global Politics

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine can be considered a major event and a significant development in the international order, with far-reaching consequences in the realm of international politics to date. Among these consequences is its impact on institutions and organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Given the presence of powerful actors such as China, India, and Russia, the SCO is regarded as one of the most influential organizations in international politics. Considering this organization's susceptibility to shifts in the international system, such as the war in Ukraine, it is important to note that the SCO Tianjin Summit of 2025 served as a demonstration of the organization's power. This study seeks to answer the following question using an explanatory-analytical method and the theoretical framework of neoliberal institutionalism: What has been the effect of the Ukraine war on the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in global politics? The research hypothesis argues that the war in Ukraine has strengthened relations among its member states, thereby raising the SCO's profile and increasing its influence. Findings indicate that the Ukraine crisis has not only increased the organization's capacity to play a more active role in managing regional and global crises but also expanded its economic, security, and political functions, fostering the formation and strengthening of an independent economic-security bloc. However, sustaining this trend will require managing internal political divisions, enhancing institutional cohesion, developing technological cooperation, and increasing international legitimacy, all of which are factors that will determine the organization's future influence on the global power structure.

Keywords: International organizations, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, International order, Ukraine War.

Introduction

Numerous events have occurred worldwide since World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Some events have had short-term impacts, while others have exerted long-term influences on the world. Following the East-West bloc divisions led by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War and the challenges that emerged, the post-Cold War era and the collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed fewer direct confrontations between the East and the West. The Ukraine war is significant precisely because it has led to a palpable confrontation between the East and the West. This event is not limited to the two belligerent countries, Russia and Ukraine, but has had short-, medium-, and long-term consequences affecting the entire international order. In other words, the Ukraine war can be considered a turning point in the East-West confrontation globally, although the bloc divisions of the Cold War era have not reemerged in the same form.

Amid this transformation of or challenge to the international order, certain countries and organizations can play key roles. One such organization is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Initially, the SCO focused on military and security objectives aimed at resolving issues among the countries that gained independence from the Soviet Union and China. Over time, member states have taken steps forward by resolving mutual issues and expanding their political, cultural, and economic cooperation. Furthermore, the accession of new member states and the organization's vast demographic and geographical reach have enhanced its significance. With the membership of powerful countries such as China, India, and Russia, the SCO has become an important actor in international relations. The presence of such nations has enabled the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with its abundant resources and population, to play a significant role in the world.

The Ukraine war and Russia's direct confrontation with the Western bloc represent a major event. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to position itself as an important player and, in other words, the heir to the Soviet Union in opposing the West and the United States. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be seen as the culmination of this approach, a war that has not only escalated Russia-West tensions to an unprecedented level but also reflects the Kremlin's efforts to redefine the European security order based on its own interests.

This article seeks to answer the following main research question: What has been the effect of the Ukraine war on the role of

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in global politics? The research hypothesis suggests that the Ukraine war has positively influenced relations among member states, thereby elevating the status of the SCO and enhancing its role. The theoretical framework of neoliberal institutionalism is used to explain the research topic. Additionally, a qualitative research method with an explanatory-analytical approach is employed, and data are collected from library and online sources.

1. Literature Review

- Sharifi and Taleshmikaeil (2025). *Iran and the Emerging Global Order after the Ukraine War: Strategic Opportunities and Challenges*. The authors argue that the Ukraine war has accelerated the transition toward a multipolar world order and enhanced Iran's geopolitical position as a middle power. Using a realist theoretical framework, they demonstrate that this shift has created opportunities for Iran, such as membership in Eastern institutions, expanded relations with China and Russia, and an enhanced role in energy markets. However, the authors caution that capitalizing on these opportunities requires adopting a balanced and multilateral foreign policy approach; otherwise, these opportunities could turn into threats due to one-sided dependence on the East and domestic instability.
- Van Furs (2024). *Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on the Background of the Transformation of the World Order: Russian and Chinese Coverage of the Problem*. In the West, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is sometimes called the "Second NATO," while China and Russia view it as a foundation for a new world order. By examining the organization's history and the positions of these two countries, this article argues that a multipolar world, unlike a unipolar one, can address security challenges and enable the equitable development of nations. The achievements of this organization demonstrate its role as a factor in regional and global stability. The author concludes that a future based on equality and respect for national interests can only be achieved within the framework of a multipolar world.
- Mohammadi and Sakineh (2022). *Iran and the Emerging New World Order: A Strategic Realignment towards SCO and BRICS*. Driven by economic needs to bypass sanctions and strategic goals to enhance its global standing, Iran is pivoting East by joining the SCO and BRICS. This move represents a calculated response to a shifting world order, aiming to secure

diplomatic influence and economic alternatives. While this reorientation strengthens Iran's position and promotes a multipolar world, it also presents challenges in balancing the different priorities of these blocs with its own domestic ambitions. Ultimately, this strategic shift is shaping new geopolitical dynamics in West Asia and beyond.

- Sahakyan (2022), in “The Ukraine Crisis in a Multipolar World Order: NATO, Russia, and China,” argues that the unipolar system of the post-Cold War era has ended, and a multipolar system is emerging in international relations. Additionally, Russia and China, through initiatives such as the New Silk Road, seek to counter the West—a trend observable in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Moreover, the perspectives of countries like China and India regarding the Ukraine war, along with their implicit support, have granted Russia greater initiative in this conflict.
- Hasheminejad and Maleki (2024), in “The Impact of the Ukraine War on Central Asia: The Rise of China or the Strengthening of Multilateralism?” analyze the geopolitical effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on developments in Central Asia. Findings indicate that the war has shifted the balance of power in a region previously dominated by Russia, leading to increased economic and political influence by China and other actors. The researchers argue that the weakening of Russia's position has created opportunities for Central Asian countries to deepen their relations with other regional and international powers.
- Flockhart and Korosteleva (2022), in “The War in Ukraine: Putin and the World of Multiple Orders,” argue that the rules-based global order has been changing for over a decade, with the liberal international order in crisis and new international orders emerging. In this context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents what Germans term a “*Zeitenwende*” (turning point), as a multi-order world is now a reality. The article elaborates on the main features and implications of a multi-order world and describes four categories of orders that will shape it. It also details Putin's vision for a Eurasian order and how his plans align with this framework.

While numerous studies have examined the impacts of the Ukraine war on the evolution of the international order, the present research adopts a novel and distinct perspective by analyzing the effects of this event on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). What distinguishes this study from existing research is its

specific focus on how the organization has been strengthened and its position elevated in light of recent developments. By providing an innovative analysis of the SCO's role in the post-Ukraine war era, this article seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature, as no independent study to date has investigated this particular aspect of the Ukraine war's consequences

2. The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as the Largest Regional Entity

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), initially focused on five countries, is now considered the world's largest regional organization in terms of geographical scope and population. The organization encompasses over 60% of the area of Eurasia and 40% of the world's population. Additionally, its member states hold 25% of the world's oil reserves and 50% of the world's gas reserves (Rad, 2022, p. 141).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new countries in Central Asia, coupled with the lack of effective military forces in these newly independent states, led them to seek rapprochement with China and Russia. Unresolved border issues and disputes between China and these states prompted China to pursue cooperation and resolve border problems. Furthermore, the fact that the newly independent states border China's Xinjiang province, a Muslim-majority region, heightened concerns about the growth of Islamic tendencies, particularly Islamic fundamentalism, in the region (Koolae, 2012). One of the reasons Central Asia holds special importance for China is its energy resources (Jamshidi et al., 2020, pp. 117–118). In this context, China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan established the Shanghai Five in 1996. The foundation for this organization, initially called the Shanghai Five and later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was primarily military cooperation and the resolution of border disputes (Koolae, 2007, p. 30).

A pivotal factor in the establishment of the SCO was the Tajik civil war and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia. Additionally, economic problems and widespread corruption, including drug and weapon trafficking, intensified the need for broad regional cooperation. The annual summits of the Shanghai Five were held in various countries. After Uzbekistan joined, the organization was renamed the Shanghai Six, paving the way for the formation of the SCO. In 2005, the annual summit included participation from new countries such as Iran, India, Mongolia, and Pakistan. In 2015, India and Pakistan became full members of the

SCO (Akhtar, 2022, pp. 600–601). In 2022, Iran also became a permanent member. The SCO, encompassing major Eurasian powers, has thus transformed into a pivotal bloc focused on security and economic cooperation (Shaikh Mohamadi & Sakineh, 2021, p. 152). Iran is considered a unique member due to its strategic geographical location, access to open seas, and abundant resources, which allow it to strengthen the transit capacity of the SCO (Nabipour, 2022, p. 17). Positioned at the heart of major land corridors within the Belt and Road Initiative, Iran's strategic importance has been significantly enhanced (Mirfakhraei, 2024, p. 645). The anti-hegemonic and justice-oriented discourse of Iranian officials suggests that Tehran does not see preserving the prevailing international order as aligned with its national interests and ideals—a perspective shared by Russia and China as SCO members (Abedi & Aslani, 2021, p. 229).

Over time, the SCO has shifted its focus from primarily military and security issues to improving economic conditions and trade relations, largely due to the presence of economic powers such as China, India, and Russia. The organization has established various institutions and working groups across economic, political, and military fields. In the military domain, following its establishment, the SCO signed a memorandum of understanding with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2006 to pursue extensive cooperation in security and countering drug trafficking. In 2009, the organization also addressed issues of cyber warfare, focusing on countering economic and social cyber threats (Kamaruddin, 2022). Since 2003, SCO member states have conducted regular military exercises to enhance coordination and strengthen military capabilities.

In the economic sphere, SCO member states signed an agreement in 2003 to strengthen economic cooperation. The Chinese Prime Minister proposed the establishment of a free trade zone to further support this cooperation. In 2006, the SCO Business Council was established, serving as an advisory and research body to assess investment conditions within the organization (Omonov, 2022, pp. 112–113). Another economic mechanism is the Interbank Consortium, established in 2005 to provide financial support for investment projects among SCO member states, including banks from India, China, and other members (Xue, 2021, pp. 188–189). Additionally, the SCO Energy Club was created to market the oil and gas reserves of member states and facilitate the transfer of these resources to European and Asian countries (Kassenova, 2010).

3. Iran's SCO Membership and the Regional Balance

The Islamic Republic of Iran, by obtaining full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), has redefined its geopolitical role within the security architecture of Eurasia and profoundly impacted the regional balance of power. This strategic transformation should be analyzed within the framework of the transition from a unipolar international order to a multipolar one, in which regional actors are redefining their positions in the global power hierarchy by joining alternative international institutions. From the perspective of its impact on the regional balance, the first point to note is the enhancement of Iran's geopolitical weight. Iran's direct and active presence within a powerful bloc comprising actors such as China and Russia has laid the foundation for a new, independent pole of power in the region and, to some extent, aligned its interests against those of the West and the United States (Karami, 2024, pp. 48–49). This enables Iran to resist and maneuver against Western geopolitical pressures not individually but within the framework of an institutionalized alliance possessing multiple levers of influence. Consequently, the traditional unipolar equation in the region has been fundamentally challenged, creating space for the emergence of competitive multipolarity and allowing Iran to further strengthen its role in regional interactions through this mechanism.

The second major impact is the change in regional security dynamics. The SCO, focusing on combating three critical issues—terrorism, extremism, and separatism—provides a collective security platform. Iran's membership signifies that Tehran can now legitimize and promote its security discourse regarding threats such as transnational terrorism not from an isolated position, but within a multilateral framework. This position significantly enhances Iran's bargaining power and influence in resolving regional crises, such as those in Afghanistan, by leveraging its own capacities (Amani Kaekanlo & Simbar, 2024, p. 223).

Third, Iran's role as a communication bridge and connecting corridor in Eurasia has increased its geopolitical importance within the SCO, directly affecting the region's economic-security balance. Major initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) depend on Iran's stability and cooperation. This interdependence has transformed Iran from a passive actor into a vital facilitator in the economic and security dynamics of Eurasia. These developments have caused the region's geopolitical center of gravity to shift toward endogenous cooperation, less dependent on the West. Within

this new framework, Iran can act as an intermediary, mediating between major powers and smaller countries in the region (Noorali & Ahmadi, 2022, pp. 1172–1173). This position allows Iran to influence the shaping of new security norms and rules in Eurasia, transforming it—due to its geographical and geopolitical position—into a key regional player.

Furthermore, Iran's active presence in the SCO has positioned the country as an important actor in managing intra-regional rivalries. By leveraging this position, Iran can help moderate traditional tensions in Central Asia and foster a more cooperative environment. This moderating role can enhance regional stability and provide a favorable context for the development of economic cooperation. Additionally, Iran's membership has facilitated the formation of new networks of technical and specialized cooperation in security fields. These networks enhance Iran's technical capabilities in various security domains and strengthen its position as a regional security hub (Haji-Yousefi & Shirkhani, 2025, pp. 92–93).

It should also be noted that Iran's presence in the SCO has made patterns of cooperation and competition in the region more complex. Although this complexity may create new challenges, it simultaneously provides Iran with unprecedented opportunities to shape a regional order based on a balance of power and mutual respect. These geopolitical developments have placed Iran at the epicenter of Eurasian transformations. By seizing this historic opportunity, Iran can become a key player in shaping the new regional order—a role that requires a deep understanding of the complexities of international relations and the ability to manage regional conflicts effectively.

Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has created new capacities for the Iran's membership in the SCO has created new capacities for multilateral diplomacy. Through this membership, Iran can play a more active role in resolving regional disputes and influence the formation of international consensus. This new position allows Iran to shape major regional trends, play a mediating role, and create balance in international relations. Furthermore, Iran can use this position to moderate rivalries among major powers in the region and foster a more cooperative environment, aligning with its national interests and promoting regional stability. The formation of specialized cooperation networks within the SCO further strengthens Iran's technical and specialized capacities across multiple fields (Haji-Yousefi & Shirkhani, 2025, p. 263). These networks contribute to enhancing

national capabilities and expanding Iran's international influence. In other words, Iran's membership in the SCO represents a turning point in the country's diplomatic history. This transformation paves the way for a broader role for Iran in the international arena and strengthens its position within the emerging multipolar global order.

4. Iran's National Interests in SCO Membership

Iran's accession to full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represents a pivotal moment in the country's foreign policy, enabling it to advance multiple national interests across security, economic, diplomatic, scientific, and cultural domains. As a platform encompassing major Eurasian powers such as China, Russia, and India, as well as key Central Asian states, the SCO provides Iran with a unique mechanism to strengthen its regional influence and pursue strategic objectives. Enhanced National Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation. A primary benefit of SCO membership lies in enhancing national security and counter-terrorism capabilities. For decades, Iran has faced security challenges along its eastern borders, including terrorism, drug trafficking, and extremism. The SCO's institutional framework, with its focus on combating these threats, offers Iran valuable opportunities for security coordination and intelligence sharing. Through participation in the organization, Iran can strengthen border cooperation with Central Asian neighbors, enhance military and security capacities, and engage in joint counter-terrorism exercises, thereby contributing directly to domestic stability and border protection (Mei, 2024, p. 42). Economic development and energy transit advantages constitute another major dimension of Iran's interests in the SCO. Amid severe Western economic sanctions, membership in the organization opens access to a combined market of over three billion people and critical transit corridors such as the International North-South Transport Corridor. This enables Iran to expand trade and energy exchanges with major economies, participate in regional infrastructure projects, and utilize alternative financial mechanisms independent of Western systems. While these opportunities remain underutilized, they offer significant potential for reducing dependence on the West and enhancing Iran's economic security (Ansarinasab & Bidmal, 2023, pp. 123–124). With the world's second-largest natural gas reserves, Iran can leverage the SCO as a platform to establish itself as a Eurasian energy hub. The organization facilitates cooperation with other major energy producers, including Russia and Central Asian

states, and could support the creation of a gas alliance similar to OPEC. Iran's strategic location also positions it as a crucial node in energy transit corridors under China's Belt and Road Initiative, promising substantial transit revenues (Moshfegh, 2024, p. 74). SCO membership further strengthens Iran's geopolitical and diplomatic standing. By participating in a bloc of major Eurasian powers, Iran gains enhanced international legitimacy and equal standing in regional decision-making processes. The organization reinforces Iran's traditional role as a bridge between East and West, allowing it to advance diplomatic initiatives on regional issues such as Afghanistan, secure support from member states in international forums, and contribute to the formulation of collective security arrangements in Eurasia. This enhanced diplomatic leverage enables Iran to negotiate more effectively and resist Western pressure. Scientific and technological cooperation constitutes another strategic benefit. The SCO provides mechanisms for collaboration in advanced fields such as information technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and renewable energy. Through enhanced academic and research exchanges, Iran can access cutting-edge technologies, elevate its scientific standards, and mitigate the effects of brain drain, contributing to long-term national development (Mashayekh, 2024, pp. 418–419). Finally, Iran's SCO membership offers opportunities to reinforce cultural and civilizational ties. As one of the world's oldest civilizations, Iran can leverage the organization to strengthen its cultural connections with regional partners. This engagement not only enhances Iran's soft power and cultural influence across Eurasia but also revitalizes its tourism sector and projects a positive international image. In sum, Iran's full membership in the SCO represents a multidimensional strategic achievement. It enhances national security, expands economic and energy opportunities, strengthens diplomatic influence, fosters scientific and technological cooperation, and promotes cultural outreach. Together, these benefits position Iran to play a more central and influential role in shaping regional dynamics and the emerging multipolar global order.

5. Causes and Background of the Outbreak of the Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine war stems from a combination of flawed political calculations, ideological drivers, unresolved security dilemmas, and failed diplomacy. Its roots are deeply intertwined with the legacy of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's oscillation between European and Russian orientations, and broader shifts in the global

security architecture.

Ukraine's post-Soviet period was characterized by fluctuating political alignments, sometimes leaning toward Europe and at other times toward Russia, with each shift producing significant consequences. Russian policymakers have consistently regarded Ukraine as an inalienable part of Russian territory—a perspective influenced by thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, who argues that Russia must dominate Ukraine due to its geopolitical position to restore the legacy of the Tsarist empire (Koolae & Anvari, 2020).

Historically, in the early years of independence, Ukrainian leaders sought to chart an autonomous path, balancing aspirations for integration with Europe against enduring ties to Russia. This ambiguity reached a climax during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. In 2013, as negotiations for an Association Agreement with the European Union neared completion, Yanukovich, under pressure and enticed by Russian financial aid and energy discounts, abruptly abandoned the agreement and pivoted toward Moscow. This decision triggered peaceful demonstrations in Kyiv's Independence Square in November 2013, which evolved into the Maidan movement, or the “Revolution of Dignity.” Protesters demanded not only a shift in foreign policy but also reforms against corruption, police violence, and authoritarianism, ultimately forcing Yanukovich to flee the country (Barnes, 2022). Russia perceived these events and the ousting of its favored president as a direct threat to its strategic interests.

In March 2014, unmarked Russian forces occupied Crimea. A hastily organized local referendum led the Crimean parliament to declare independence. Despite the Ukrainian constitution mandating a national referendum for border changes, Russia formally annexed Crimea. The UN General Assembly condemned the annexation, emphasizing Ukraine's territorial integrity and declaring the referendum illegal, with the vote passing 100 in favor, 11 against, and 58 abstentions. Simultaneously, armed separatist movements emerged in Donetsk and Luhansk, bolstered by covert Russian support (Yari, 2020). These developments in 2014 set the stage for further confrontations, ultimately culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Ideological factors also played a decisive role. In a 2021 essay, Vladimir Putin argued that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians share a common historical statehood and that Ukraine's sovereignty is artificial (Putin, 2021). This narrative of historical unity provided an ideological justification for Moscow's intervention. Analysts

caution that even if Putin leaves power, the expansionist ideology may persist within the Russian political system.

Security concerns further exacerbated tensions. NATO's eastward expansion, particularly the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the alliance, was perceived by Russia as direct encroachment into its sphere of influence. This perception framed Russia's domestic discourse, where defending against Western aggression became a persistent justification for an assertive foreign policy. Ukraine's pursuit of European integration, combined with domestic mobilization and resistance, directly conflicted with Russia's ambition to reassert dominance by force. The convergence of Ukraine's internal reforms, Russia's authoritarian ambitions, and shifting international alliances created conditions conducive to war.

Political and military calculations were also critical. Ukraine's democratic transformation and European integration were perceived by Moscow as ideological threats. The emergence of a democratic, culturally aligned neighbor risked inspiring domestic opposition within Russia. In preparation for the 2022 invasion, Russia recognized the separatist-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, using this as a pretext for military escalation. The invasion reflected years of unresolved eastern conflict and Moscow's insistence on Ukraine's neutrality, disarmament, and territorial concessions. Western responses, including sanctions, military aid, and diplomatic isolation, further heightened the war's geopolitical stakes.

Social factors and public opinion played a subtler role. Polls in Russia indicated varying levels of public support for the invasion, reflecting a broader imperialist mindset. While the decision to invade rested in a small circle around Putin (Stavoskaya, 2022), its execution relied on cultivating minimal domestic acceptance and suppressing opposition. Years of state propaganda constructed a narrative portraying Ukraine as dominated by "neo-Nazis" threatening Russian-speaking populations and NATO as an existential threat. Combined with censorship and laws criminalizing dissent, this created an atmosphere of passive acquiescence, sufficient for the Kremlin to prevent unrest without requiring active support.

Russian leadership's perception of Western weakness and disunity also influenced strategic calculations. Past conflicts, including the 2008 war in Georgia and military intervention in Syria, reinforced the belief that the United States and its European allies would avoid direct confrontation (Stegen, 2011, pp. 6509–

6510). The isolation induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the limited perspectives within Putin's inner circle further contributed to miscalculations, leading Moscow to assume that Ukraine could be subdued quickly, a misjudgment that shaped the war into a protracted conflict.

Economic and energy considerations were equally influential. Russia, as a leading exporter of gas and oil, has long used energy as a geopolitical tool. Ukraine's efforts to reduce reliance on Russian energy—through reverse gas imports from Europe and integration into global energy markets—threatened Moscow's leverage (Atanasova, 2024). EU and US sanctions following Crimea's annexation intensified these concerns, prompting Moscow to take preemptive action before losing strategic economic influence over Ukraine.

Ideologically, the concept of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir) frames Ukraine's independence as a threat to Russia's civilizational and geopolitical survival. This vision, rooted in nationalist and religious doctrines, underpins Kremlin rhetoric justifying intervention (Putin, 2021).

In sum, the Russia-Ukraine war emerged from a convergence of historical, ideological, security, political, and economic factors. The Soviet legacy, Russian perceptions of Ukraine as integral territory, expansionist ideologies, NATO's eastward expansion, and Ukraine's democratic ambitions collectively created the conditions for conflict. The annexation of Crimea, energy politics, and Kremlin miscalculations further escalated tensions, culminating in the 2022 invasion. The war thus represents not only unresolved post-Soviet disputes but also a clash between Ukraine's democratic aspirations and Russia's imperial worldview, with profound implications for the international order.

6. The Impact of the Ukraine War on Strengthening the Position of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped global economic and security dynamics, significantly reinforcing the position of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an emerging economic, political, and security framework in Eurasia. One of the most immediate and tangible effects of the conflict has been the strengthening of intra-organizational economic coordination among SCO member states, particularly as a response to the extensive sanctions imposed on Russia by Western powers. These sanctions, targeting key sectors of the Russian economy, created an urgent need for alternative markets, supply chains, energy routes, and

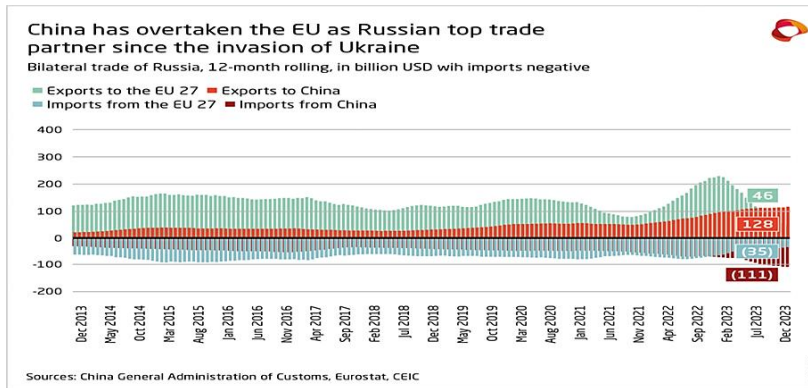
financial mechanisms outside Western-controlled systems. In response, SCO members intensified trade relations, expanded investment flows, and diversified economic partnerships, thereby enhancing collective economic resilience.

By deepening cooperation among its members in Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia—including China, India, Pakistan, and Iran—the SCO has fostered a dense network of regional partnerships capable of alleviating the economic pressure placed on Russia. Expanding energy cooperation, infrastructure development, logistics connectivity, and technology exchanges demonstrate that the organization is increasingly capable of substituting traditional Western-dominated economic relationships. In this process, China has emerged as the central economic pillar of the SCO. Following the outbreak of the war, Sino-Russian trade reached unprecedented levels, exceeding \$240 billion in 2023, a marked increase compared to pre-war figures (Reuters, 2024). This surge reflects not merely an opportunistic adjustment but a deliberate strategy aimed at strengthening Eurasian economic integration.

For Russia, China has provided essential markets for energy exports, industrial goods, and high-technology products, allowing the Russian economy to maintain continuity despite international isolation. For China, this cooperation has consolidated its role as a strategic economic anchor across Eurasia, expanded its influence over regional trade flows, and ensured long-term access to energy resources at competitive prices. The resulting interdependence has strengthened the economic foundations of the SCO, transforming it into a more resilient platform for regional cooperation.

In the trade sphere, China has effectively filled the gap left by Western sanctions against Russia. Moscow has increasingly relied on the Chinese economy, with China becoming Russia's fastest-growing export destination. Chinese goods have largely replaced European exports and those from other sanctioning states, making China the only major industrialized economy trading with Russia without restrictions—an arrangement of critical importance for countering the effects of sanctions (Quénelle, 2024). This structural shift is illustrated below.

Chart (1): China's Replacement of Europe as Russia's Top Trading Partner After the Invasion of Ukraine



Source: (Sabanadze & others, 2024, p. 17)

Central Asian SCO members, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have also benefited from intensified economic engagement. Increased Chinese investment in infrastructure, logistics hubs, and transnational trade routes connecting China and Russia has improved regional connectivity and stimulated local economies. These developments have reduced the vulnerability of Central Asian states to external shocks by diversifying income streams and opening alternative markets. The expansion of energy and transport infrastructure has further strengthened the SCO's capacity for collective economic action, fostering shared prosperity and strategic interdependence among member states.

Energy cooperation has emerged as a particularly critical pillar of economic coordination within the SCO following the Ukraine war. The conflict severely disrupted global energy markets, especially for Russia, which had long depended on European demand for oil and natural gas exports. Western restrictions forced Russia to redirect energy flows toward SCO members—primarily China, India, and Central Asian partners—creating new patterns of mutual dependence and resilience (Spiro, 2025, pp. 4–8). China has become the largest recipient of Russian crude oil, liquefied natural gas, and coal, with energy trade reaching record levels as Russia pivoted decisively toward the East. Notably, 21.5% of China's crude oil imports in 2024 originated from Russia (Eiu.com, 2024). For Russia, this shift has stabilized energy revenues and softened the impact of sanctions, while for China it has ensured long-term energy security amid global instability.

Beyond trade, the SCO has expanded joint energy infrastructure

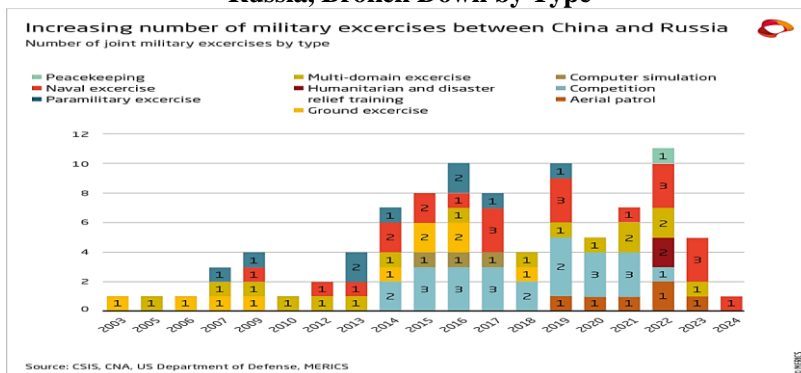
projects, including pipelines, power transmission grids, and storage facilities, enhancing the efficiency and security of regional energy distribution. Energy corridors linking Russian oil and gas fields to China and Central Asia have been upgraded and diversified, reducing vulnerability to geopolitical disruptions (Zuo, 2024). Financial mechanisms supporting energy cooperation—such as settlements in local currencies, alternative payment systems, and regional investment funds—have further reduced dependence on the US dollar and the euro, insulating energy trade from Western financial pressure (Thecradle.co, 2024). These initiatives strengthen the SCO's financial autonomy and reinforce its role as a quasi-international economic actor capable of counterbalancing Western-dominated financial networks.

At the same time, energy cooperation carries broader strategic implications. Concentrating energy flows within the SCO framework enhances collective bargaining power in global markets and reinforces the organization's geopolitical relevance. This capacity to coordinate economic and energy policies during a global crisis underscores the SCO's evolution from a regional forum into a cohesive bloc capable of managing systemic shocks.

Parallel to economic consolidation, the Ukraine war has accelerated political, security, and military cooperation within the SCO. Originally established as a platform focused on counter-terrorism and border security, the organization has expanded its strategic scope in response to heightened Eurasian security concerns. Member states have increased coordination of defense postures, intensified intelligence sharing, and expanded joint military exercises, enhancing institutional cohesion and positioning the SCO as a central actor in regional stability.

Since the outbreak of the war, China and Russia have significantly expanded joint military exercises involving large-scale troop deployments, advanced technologies, and coordinated air, land, and naval operations. These exercises signal growing strategic alignment and serve as demonstrations of collective capability to external actors. A counter-terrorism-focused military exercise held in Kyrgyzstan on September 21, 2023, exemplifies this trend (Eng.sectsc.org, 2023). In parallel, increased Chinese exports of dual-use goods, machinery, and components have supported Russia's defense-industrial capacity, while joint exercises—including some involving Iran—have further enhanced interoperability and strategic depth (Sabanadze et al., 2024, p. 12)..

Chart (2): Increase in Military Exercises between China and Russia, Broken Down by Type



Source: (Sabanadze & others, 2024, p. 18)

Military cooperation has also expanded into cyber defense, surveillance technologies, and logistical coordination. China has contributed advanced technical capabilities, while Russia has shared combat experience gained under wartime conditions. Intelligence cooperation has intensified as well, with SCO members coordinating efforts to monitor transnational threats, cyber-attacks, border instability, and political subversion. This enhanced information sharing improves collective situational awareness and strengthens crisis response capacity across Eurasia (Boltuc, 2024).

The combined effect of military, intelligence, and diplomatic coordination has reshaped the Eurasian security architecture. The Ukraine war has exposed the limitations of NATO-centric security frameworks in addressing global instability, creating space for the SCO to emerge as a balancing force. By offering integrated security planning and multilateral coordination, the SCO enables member states to pursue independent security strategies during crises. Notably, the organization has also facilitated cooperation between historically adversarial members, such as India and Pakistan, demonstrating its capacity to bridge bilateral tensions in the interest of collective security (Bhaya, 2025).

Normatively, the SCO has articulated principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and multipolar cooperation, challenging Western-centric governance models. Central Asian members have leveraged the organization to balance relations with both China and Russia while benefiting from regional integration. Russia's growing isolation from Western military and economic structures has further increased its reliance on SCO partners for operational coordination and intelligence support. The inclusion of new members and

dialogue partners, notably Iran, has expanded the SCO's geostrategic reach, linking Central, South, and West Asia within a unified framework (Sun and Elmahly, 2018).

Recent high-level SCO meetings in China, accompanied by military parades in Beijing, symbolized broader shifts in the global order. The presence of leaders from China, Russia, and North Korea underscored the emergence of a non-Western axis challenging American unipolarity. Official rhetoric emphasizing “global justice” and criticizing “Western bullying” reflects a concerted effort to shape a multipolar international system (Xinhua, 2025). Although the SCO has not yet achieved the institutional cohesion of NATO or the economic power of the G7, it encompasses nearly 40% of the world's population and controls vast Eurasian energy resources. In response to these developments, former US President Donald Trump publicly accused China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea of conspiring against the United States, highlighting the growing perception of the SCO as a significant challenger within the evolving global order (Clayton, 2025).

Conclusion

An analysis of the evolutionary trajectory of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) demonstrates that over the past two decades it has undergone a significant transformation. Initially established as a limited security mechanism primarily concerned with managing border disputes, the SCO has evolved into a multifaceted organization with broad economic, security, and political functions. The Ukraine crisis, as one of the most consequential geopolitical developments of the past decade, has played a direct and undeniable role in strengthening the Organization's position and redefining its scope of influence and operational missions at both regional and international levels. In the economic domain, the Ukraine war and its repercussions—particularly the extensive Western sanctions imposed on Russia—have prompted member states to intensify intra-regional cooperation. The expansion of trade in local currencies, the establishment of independent financial channels, and joint investments in energy, transportation, and technology have not only reduced reliance on the Western-dominated international financial system but have also transformed the SCO into an effective platform for building economic networks resilient to geopolitical shocks.

In the security sphere, the Ukraine war has substantially heightened the importance of defensive cohesion and strategic coordination among SCO members. The increased frequency of

joint military exercises, the expansion of counter-terrorism cooperation, and the systematic exchange of intelligence reflect the Organization's gradual transition from a primarily consultative security framework toward an operational and quasi-defensive mechanism. This trend has reinforced bilateral cooperation between major powers within the Organization, notably China and Russia, while simultaneously providing a foundation for the active participation of other members—including India, Pakistan, and Central Asian states—in collective security initiatives. From a broader geopolitical perspective, the SCO now functions as one of the principal centers of power in Eurasia and as an instrument for balancing Western-centric institutional structures. The convergence of China's economic capacity, Russia's military power, and India's industrial and demographic potential has enabled the Organization to emerge as a globally influential actor capable of shaping the evolving rules of international engagement.

Within this context, the full membership of the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a key factor in enhancing the SCO's strategic posture. Iran's distinctive geopolitical position, access to open seas, vast energy resources, and role as a connective bridge between East and West across Eurasia significantly strengthen the Organization's capacity to develop independent trade and energy corridors. From a security standpoint, Iran can contribute its extensive experience in countering terrorism and extremism within the SCO framework, thereby reinforcing stability in Central Asia and its surrounding regions. Overall, the Ukraine crisis has expanded the SCO's economic, security, and political functions and has consolidated its position within the international system. This transformation has not only increased the Organization's ability to play a more active role in managing regional and global crises but has also enhanced the prospects for the emergence of a more autonomous economic and security bloc. Nevertheless, the sustainability of this trajectory depends on the effective management of internal political divergences, the strengthening of institutional cohesion, the advancement of technological cooperation, and the enhancement of international legitimacy. In this process, Iran—by fully leveraging its strategic capacities—can play a decisive role in shaping the emerging Eurasian order.

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